

Article

Coming in to Whānau: Takatāpui and Irahuhua Relationships and Decolonisation

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Abstract

Whānau (family) is a foundational unit of Māori social organisation, and the replacement of Māori family structures with Western nuclear models is widely regarded as among the most significant tools of colonisation. As Māori move toward decolonisation and re-Indigenisation, approaches to family and identity are shifting from imported structures. However, takatāpui and irahuhua (LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse Māori) are rarely explicitly included in these movements. Contemporary framings of whānau within Māori discourse can inadvertently reiterate colonial talking points, particularly regarding binary gender roles, divisions of labour, and the boundaries of what constitutes whānau. Building on takatāpui scholarship and the findings from three separate wānanga (targeted collective conversations) across a 1.5-year period with 18 irahuhua participants, the article examines the contrasts and connections between “coming out” and “coming in” to tradition and whānau. These conversations revealed that when participants enact self-determination and “come in” to their whānau, they demonstrate pathways to strengthen and restore Māori understandings of whānau and challenge the role of historic inquiry in modern Māori politics. Grounded in one wānanga participant’s understanding that “family pressures that make you feel divided [are] just what the coloniser wanted,” this article explores how takatāpui and irahuhua strengthen their communities and demonstrate sovereignty in settler contexts.

Keywords: takatāpui; irahuhua; decolonisation; coming in; indigi-queer; transgender

1. Introduction

Literature on takatāpui/irahuhua often returns to a simple yet profound statement: the presence of whānau is vital to individual wellbeing. This article argues that the inverse is also true: the presence of takatāpui/irahuhua is vital to whānau wellbeing. Such a claim immediately requires clarification: the acceptance of Queer Māori into Māori communities should not hinge on the benefits Queer Māori can provide to those communities, as conditional acceptance cannot be considered true acceptance (Laurence 2020; Hamley et al. 2025; Hamley et al. 2021; McBreen 2012; Green and Pihama 2023; Kerekere 2017; Doyle 2023; Ngātai-Tautuku 2025). As such, this article aims to walk a narrow line of outlining the various ways that takatāpui/irahuhua uniquely strengthen te ao Māori (the Māori world), without tipping into the terrain of needing to *prove* their worth or value. Through calling attention to the ways colonisation occurs in our communities, exploring the values underpinning tikanga (proper action), and emphasising relationality above all else in Māori identity, takatāpui/irahuhua are central actors in the ongoing struggle for sovereignty in Indigenous contexts. Without understanding the various factors which feed



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into contemporary Indigenous gender identity, Māori will be “locked in a vicious circle of essentialist claims-making and identity deconstruction, having to repeatedly deliberate over and unpack problematic identity claims and practices only to have them resurface in another place and context” (Coulthard 2014, p. 96).

Literature on the relationships of takatāpui and irahuhua focuses on the individual and how they connect to their families and communities, but rarely explores the impacts of this connection on the family and community. Filling this gap was a key component of the author’s PhD research, as participants routinely felt that their attempts to contribute to their whānau and strengthen their culture were underappreciated or rejected. The research examined how irahuhua connect to tā moko (traditional tattooing) and gender, and involved three wānanga, a group tattoo session, two autoethnographic tattoo reflections, and participant observation over four noho marae (long term stays). At each point of interaction, participants expressed frustration at the internalised colonisation they felt Māori perpetuated when it came to embracing Queerness and fluidity in gender. When discussing this idea at third wānanga, Korohū reframed the sentiment by pointing out that “family pressures that make you feel divided [are] just what the coloniser wanted”. Dividing whānau by isolating and rejecting takatāpui/irahuhua serves to feed colonial interests, as it involves the embrace by Māori of non-Māori values.

This article takes Korohū’s assertion and other insights raised in the three wānanga and explores the many ways in which rejecting takatāpui/irahuhua whanaunga (family members) serves colonial interests, while embracing these whanaunga strengthens hapori (collectives). The article begins by defining the terms takatāpui and irahuhua and then turns to the question of colonisation. It charts how Māori respond to colonisation and explores gender as a case study of how and why such colonisation has occurred, its impacts on Māori, and the ways that takatāpui and irahuhua can push back against this colonisation if they choose to do so. The most common tools of decolonisation for Māori come from returning to pre-colonial history and tikanga, though this article argues that these records can be unsteady and these tikanga practices can be rigid instead of responsive. Building on the observation from Māori scholars and practitioners that tikanga is based on values rather than actions, and the most central of these values is whanaungatanga (relationality), the many ways takatāpui and irahuhua embody whanaungatanga and support their whanaunga are then outlined. Finally, the article concludes that these intentional actions can be seen as a form of ‘coming in’, which benefits the individual and the collective they come into.

2. Takatāpui and Irahuhua

This writing uses the terms takatāpui and irahuhua to refer to Queer and gender-diverse Māori, respectively. Takatāpui is translated varyingly but generally refers to an intimate companion of the same sex and has come to be framed as an umbrella term inclusive of all Māori gender and sexual identities (Te Awekotuku 1991; Kerekere 2017; Murray 2003; Glover et al. 2009; Hutchings and Aspin 2007; Pega and McEwan 2010). Critically, the term refers to identities of “gender and sexuality *as shaped by* Māori culture, resisting conformity” (Hamley et al. 2025, p. 15, emphasis in original). Takatāpui is a specifically Māori term for a specifically Māori identity, grounded in Māori culture/s. Though Kerekere (2017, p. 24) goes to great lengths to outline that the term takatāpui is inclusive of gender, she also warns that gender diverse and intersex people can be “excluded when takatāpui identity is confined to sexual orientation and binary identities”. This is a recurring issue in LGBTQ+ spaces, where research focus, political analysis, human rights, and community organisation have shifted towards sexuality and can frame gender identity as a distraction or separate issue (Perez 2005). Kerekere (2017), Ngātai-Tautuku (2025), and

Doyle (2023) all encourage the LGBTQ+ Māori community to define their own identities, but work under the label of takatāpui more broadly. As such, the term takatāpui features heavily in this article. However, to emphasise where gendered realities are more pronounced, and a sexuality-based analysis may not be sufficient, the term irahuhua is also utilised to refer to gender diversity specifically.

Irahuhua derives from intervention to the sexuality-focused takatāpui, based around the prefix 'ira'. Paora (2023a, 2023b) utilises the dual terms of irarua and irarere, and Fenaughty et al. (2023) introduce the label irawhiti, while participants in the PhD research had often encountered the term irakore in community spaces. Fenaughty et al. (2023) also offer the term ira huhua, written with a space between the two morphemes. As is clear from these varied terms, ira is a prefix. At its most fundamental, ira can be understood as the truest essence of the self. Mika (2015, p. 103) defines ira further than just soul or essence, stating that "ira suggests that the self becomes what it is". Paora (2023a, p. 1) takes the approach that "ira is our vessel of connection to the physical and spiritual worlds, and also to the past and future". The 'ira' is accompanied by a suffix which indicates the specific state that ira is assembled or embodied in. Huhua can be translated to mean abundance and multiplicity—irahuhua is thus an essence which contains much within it. This term seems most apt to define gender diversity, not necessarily limited to transition or non-binary identities (irawhiti and irakore respectively), but also not as active and fluid as irarere or irarua. Irahuhua can be positioned as complimentary to takatāpui, a label which is still resolutely Māori, and still connected to takatāpui, but responsive to the specific gendered realities of what it means to be not only Queer, but gender Queer. This in and of itself is one of the ways in which takatāpui and irahuhua strengthen te ao Māori—by requiring examination of the terms we use to organise and define ourselves, the way we structure gender, and how our identities come to be.

3. Responding to Colonialism

Māori thinkers, such as Mikaere (2011; in Mikaere and Hutchings 2013; in Pihama et al. 2019a, Pihama 2021), Jackson (in Mikaere and Hutchings 2013; in Elkington et al. 2020; Jackson 2021), and Mead (1995, 1999, 2016), have looked to chart the trajectory of colonisation in Aotearoa¹, engage with the various realities of being post-colonial, and see where the various strands of colonisation which comprise modern Māori social structures first came into existence. Each of these scholars questions the perilous state of modern Indigeneity, where decolonisation proves to be a fickle thing and the impacts of colonisation may never be undone. As Moyle (2023, 2025) and Walters et al. (2011) discuss, social and historical trauma is cumulative and embodied, impacting Indigenous populations long beyond the original trauma. This is not to say Māori have 'been colonised' and we should accept it, but that striving for decolonisation (or the even more ambitious re-Indigenisation) may not be possible when the modern Māori world has changed so profoundly from the pre-colonial² one. As Nikora and Te Awekotuku (2016) and Pihama (in Mikaere and Hutchings 2013) recognise, the world that Māori live in is one of constant change, which tūpuna (ancestors) largely would not have expected or desired—but it is the world, and Māori must live within it. Hokowhitu (2009, p. 133) navigates through this change by pushing beyond history, as

Indigenous theorising cannot fully develop without the possibility for existential agency, for it cannot be that the atrocities of colonisation can be the defining point, the point Indigenous existentialism remains scarred indeterminately. Indigenous existentialism must materialise beyond such embodied and genealogical pain. The physical endurance of pain may not be a choice, but Indigenous people can choose to live beyond the genealogical scarring inflicted by colonisation.

Just as colonisation is a recurring process which manifests variously and across all sectors of the modern Indigenous world, the response to colonisation must be equally multifaceted and span across history into the future in order for Māori to be active participants in Māori social construction, not mere respondents to the actions of colonisers past, present, and future. Responding to colonisation with Indigenous agency requires acceptance of harm and the ability to move beyond it.

The Colonisation of Gender

One of the more pervasive appearances of colonisation has been the reframing and naturalisation of Western gendered ideals. Gender is often embedded deep into Māori cultural practice, and many theorists in both Indigenous and Queer studies (Butler 1993, 1999, 2004, 2009; Halberstam 1998, 2005, 2016, 2018; Lugones 2007; Pihama 2021; Johnston and Pihama in Pihama et al. 2019a, 2019b; Evang 2022; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Simmonds 2009, 2011; Griggs 1998; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) have outlined the radically different constructions of gender for those within the colonised and coloniser spheres, illustrating how the creation of practice of gender is not only a result of colonisation, but an active element of it. Hokowhitu (2004), Paora (2023a, 2023b), de Bres and Morrison-Young (2024), Whitinui (2014), Rua (2015), Hamley (2025), and Stanley (in Nikora et al. 2003), all paint the picture of Māori masculinity as a complex issue, where competing discourses clash on the body of Māori men who then reiterate these often contradictory ideas in their lives. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 841) identify that this “‘masculinity’ represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices”. Generally, the Māori man is framed as a traditionalist, a staunch man’s man (Pihama et al. 2020; Kerekere 2017). This includes rejecting non-traditional gender and sexualities, and encouraging a hierarchical gender binary. Māori men are positioned, and position themselves, above Māori women as the natural chiefs, to gain some advantage as Indigenous peoples in a profoundly unfair society. Coulthard (2014, p. 94) writes that “the reification and misuse of culture in this case [Native men’s misogyny] cannot be understood without reference to the colonial context within which it continues to flourish”. The limitations and powers that come with the identity of the Māori male are themselves a result of colonisation, but without any targeted challenge to the grounds of this identity, the various political forces which influence it are rendered invisible.

This challenge often comes from takatāpui and irahuhua. Pihama et al. (2020, p. 18) write that “the “beingness” of takatāpui . . . is a political matter” and Eleftheriadis (2018) and Butler (2004) explain that Queer actors show—through living as ‘Queer’—the profoundly performative nature of gender relations. Takatāpui and irahuhua can, if they choose to do so, confront gender identity and the process of creating gender, often challenging what are considered unquestioned aspects of te ao Māori. It is important here to avoid the trope where takatāpui and irahuhua are framed as “inherently fluid, our role is to demonstrate how to break free from tradition when it does not make sense” (Morrison-Young 2025, p. 82), thus making it the constant role of Queer Māori to stand in constant opposition to te ao Māori. Bordo (2003, p. 294) stresses that “subversion is contextual, historical, and above all, social. No matter how exciting the destabilizing potential of texts, bodily or otherwise, whether those texts are subversive or recuperative or both or neither cannot be determined in abstraction from actual social practice”. Takatāpui and irahuhua are a broad community within te ao Māori. Being takatāpui or irahuhua does not *inherently* mean anything. Many of Dickson et al.’s (2023) participants spoke of being unaware of their identity or repressing it in favour of cohesion with family due to the heavy social pressures they experienced. They were not challenging or subversive, they simply lived their lives in the ways they felt necessary. Takatāpui and irahuhua include Māori who live as their binary gender

or within an unspoken relationship, within their expected roles, without any challenge or question. That is just as legitimate an expression of identity as those who do pose an obvious challenge to the status quo. Sovereignty is not solely aspirational; it also involves supporting people now. While we can claim that a term like dysphoria “does not accord with concepts of Indigenous duality” (Morrison-Young 2025, p. 85), and interrogating the cultural origins of terms like dysphoria are important ventures, we must also keep in mind that there are Māori who feel dysphoric. HRT is not necessarily inconsistent with tikanga just because it is responding to a colonial situation and “transitioning is an essential part of the journey to align their tinana [body] with their wairua [spirit]” (Kerekere 2017, p. 33). In the author’s PhD research, Rātā struggled with the weight of being framed as the ultimate and inherent challenge to colonial gender roles, feeling as if it lay on takatāpui and irahuhua to “take on the wero” of dismantling colonial ideas. One of the participants in Ravulo et al. (2024, p. 229) framed their constant fighting as a result of defending one’s unchosen identity as “unhealthy”, because it required the community to deal with an overwhelming amount of “hate” in order to build such resilience. The weight of challenging and being in opposition to broader communities is not a weight taken by choice, as the rigid gender roles which inform te ao Māori are often challenged by the mere existence of takatāpui and irahuhua in particular.

4. Clinging to the Past

The weight of the challenge that takatāpui and irahuhua face often comes from the tension between old and young, modern and traditional—a false dichotomy, but a strong one nonetheless. There is a seemingly unwavering belief in Māori communities that we should listen to our kaumātua (elders) without question. Certainly, Queer and takatāpui elders do exist, and bring with them the same wealth of knowledge and experience as others raised to the rank of kaumātua. They are not merely part of history; they are active participants in both takatāpui and Māori communities. Takatāpui and irahuhua kaumātua may indeed be a small population (Dickson et al. 2023), but they are kaumātua and deserve to be treated and recognised as such. However, these kaumātua note that their own acceptance of takatāpui and irahuhua is not the standard, as “[o]ur elders grew up when homosexuality was illegal, HIV/AIDS was a death sentence, there were no protections against discrimination, and access to supports for transitioning were non-existent” (as cited in Dickson et al. 2023, p. 9). Non-takatāpui kaumātua often “strongly police sexual norms, reflecting the huge impact of the colonising culture” (McBreen 2012, p. 31), rejecting issues of Queerness in favour of an often religious and binary gendered perspective. This is an unfortunate reality across marae (gathering places), where Māori need to navigate around the limitations of the knowledge which kaumātua have in all manners of tikanga, while still respecting their wealth of experience. Mikaere (in Mikaere and Hutchings 2013, p. 28) says “[i]t is certainly not for me, the beneficiary of the decisions that they made in their time, to judge them now. However, now that our physical survival is secure, I have the luxury—indeed, I would say the duty—to consider how best to secure our survival in cultural terms”. For one participant in the PhD research (Maire), when taking on their moko kauae (chin markings) as irahuhua, the guidance of kaumātua was exactly that: guidance. They integrated the knowledge that the kaumātua provided with their own understanding of tikanga and sought to strike a balance between the old ways, often formed in times of trauma, and a more adaptable and fluid form of tikanga. This often required stepping back and critically reviewing the tikanga that kaumātua pass on, and inspecting it as it passes through the generations instead of accepting a single history to be unquestionably true.

Such review is not merely historical, as the whakataukī (short wisdom) ‘ka mua ka muri’ (walking backwards into the future) is often used to signal the paramount significance

of looking back, and restoring history—understanding how we have been, and how we have lived. But the past is only half the whakataukī, and “identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’”. It belongs to the future as much as the past” (Robson and Reid 2001, p. 20). Critical analysis of the past is a vital endeavour, but requires delicate handling of that past, and awareness of the future it is leading to. The exclusion of takatāpui and irahuhua rarely demonstrates such care, instead favouring ideological sentiment and broad, surface level claims. In a 2025 interview, Māori anti-trans organiser Michelle Uriarau (in Boynton 2025, 16:40–16:50) claimed falsely that “there’s nothing in our culture, there’s no carvings to even prove that we believed that any of our tamariki were born in wrong bodies”. In this understanding, gender and sexuality requires strict coherence to traditional, pre-colonial practices, while religion, economy, and art is allowed to develop. To figures like Uriarau, ‘pre-colonial’ te ao Māori, a somewhat homogenous thing, did not express notions of gender diversity and therefore it is irrelevant today. Cultural practices were strictly gendered, and every element of the social world was divided into a male and female side, though even those who agree that te ao Māori organised in the masculine and feminine spheres provide the disclaimer that “it is a myth that there was a clearly defined line between the roles and responsibilities of each gender” (Tauroa 2021, pp. 9–10). Such fluidity is incompatible with much misogynistic and transphobic rhetoric, and in its place, historical ‘evidence’ and traditional values come to the fore.

These evidence and values are often considered unquestionable, and writings from the time of early contact suggest gender conservatism and adherence to traditional family values of the domestic mother and the warrior father (Cooper as cited in Te Awēkotuku 1991; Best 1924, n.d.; Paora 2023a; Hartendorp 2019; Mitchell and Olsen-Reeder 2021). This is particularly noteworthy when taking into account that “indigenous nations in the Pacific and abroad have recorded multiple forms of gender expression, [therefore] the scarcity of information on the topic in te ao Māori has left some scholars puzzled” (Hartendorp 2019, para. 8). Indeed, even takatāpui concede that “[t]here is not yet evidence that Māori had diverse gender identities or that takatāpui played specific roles in pre-colonial times; notwithstanding any roles which have developed over the past 150 years” (Kerekere 2017, p. 82)—but the absence of presence is not the same as a presence of absence. The fact that gender diversity was not remarked upon does not indicate non-existence, it simply indicates that gender was not the primary factor in a person’s place (Pihama in Pihama et al. 2019b; Maclean in Barnes and Tse 2021; Tauroa 2021). This non-hierarchy of gendered and sexual identity was not passed on through early contact writings; however, non-Māori ethnographers wrote from a mindset in which the gender binary was one of the most influential forces in society (Simmonds 2009; Perez 2005; Hokowhitu 2009; Bordo 2003; Pihama 2021; Mikaere 2011). Women, takatāpui, and irahuhua were largely ignored when these writings were made, as they were seen to have little impact on the world they lived in and they were categorised according to the whims of their observers (Mikaere 2021; Tauroa 2021). What they thought, how they viewed the world, and their place within it, was left to the men in their lives to determine. There were also very few standards for translation, meaning terms such as ‘wahine’ were translated flatly to mean ‘woman’, with no consideration of the broader contexts around such a term (Paora 2023b; Pihama as cited in Simmonds 2011). Reliance on the writings of non-Māori authors can cement non-Māori biases and perspectives into what we see as traditional knowledges. Pihama (in Pihama et al. 2019b, p. 193) argues that:

[e]arly descriptions of Māori society by Pākehā ethnographers and anthropologists were particularly influential in the re-construction of our relationships within the frame of colonial gendered relations where the mana of Māori women began to be redefined, and colonial dominant views of sexuality, sexual identity

and gender identity were imposed upon our people in ways that created layers of oppression for takatāpui.

Reliance on history, and an unchallenged belief that such histories are the ideal way of living, is only half of the equation. Not only is a return to pre-colonial realities borderline impossible when built on unsteady grounds with unsteady records, there is also a concerning lean towards stasis when Māori try to return to the traditional ways.

Indigenous cultures are not stagnant things, and to argue such is conceding development and change to the realm of the more advanced coloniser. Hegel (as cited in [Stone 2020](#), 251 emphasis in original), for example, argued that “Africans and Indigenous Americans lack any awareness of freedom; their worlds are *fully*, non-ambiguously pre-historical, whereas Oriental pre-history is on the threshold of world history and to that extent lies partly within it”. There is a long history of colonisation framing the Indigene as an object upon which change occurs, not an active agent of that change. Tradition and historicity have become conflated with “the law—everything that is practiced has been ‘handed down’ to us from on high, beyond challenge and above reproach” (Mikaere in [Mikaere and Hutchings 2013](#), p. 27). In a culture which evolves, it is the duty of each generation to care for the world of the former, while clearing the path for the latter ([Robson and Reid 2001](#); [Laurence 2020](#); [Moyle 2023](#)). This includes demonstrating the values which must be carried on and adapting to the circumstances yet to come—embodying the right way of acting which is central to tikanga.

5. Tikanga, Kawa, Kaupapa

McBreen (in [Pihama et al. 2019b](#), pp. 140–41) sidesteps the reliance on historic inquiry as it is an “impossible question, because the answer will depend on how far back we go, and who we ask. . . The more useful question is whether or not something is consistent with what we know to be tika”. Tikanga could not be more opposed to a static, exclusionary, and historically bound framing, and instead refers to growth and development, adapting a series of principles to each individual circumstance ([Mead 2016](#); [Ormond and Ormond 2018](#); Marsden; Mahuika; Kāretu in [King 1975](#)). As [Mead \(2016, p. 385\)](#) defines it: “there is a range of variables that impinge not only on how the tikanga is interpreted but also on its practice. Subtle and sometimes major changes are introduced every time a tikanga is practised”. Tikanga is often miscategorised when individuals are actually referring to kawa. [Roa \(2022\)](#) explains that kawa are the rules set at a hapū, marae, even whānau level, based on what is tika for each group at each time, and are the output of the tikanga. Perhaps some of these kawa could be exclusive and align perfectly to the colonial gender binary. This article does not aim to address the question of kawa and its place in an evolving world, which would take years, possibly decades of marae-based wānanga in each individual hapū ([McBreen 2012](#)).

One of the most prominent wānanga being held on marae, which takatāpui and irahuhua can provide valuable guidance in, is the position of a woman’s voice in karanga (opening call) and whaikōrero (commencing speech). A long-held kawa on many marae is that it is the voice of a wāhine which opens the pōwhiri through karanga ([Roa 2022](#)). Delving into the tikanga which informs the kawa, the voice of the kaikaranga (caller) “resonates with the first voice of creation, linking to all who have gone before” ([Toki et al. 2022](#), p. 45). In this post-colonial te ao Māori, only a woman can bear a child, so only a woman can karanga. We have made a jump that “[t]he power of Māori women rests with the whare tangata, the house of humanity also encompassing the womb” ([Sharman 2019](#), p. 26), even though “[i]n traditional Māori society, women were never confined in this way” (Yates-Smith in [Pihama et al. 2019b](#), p. 81). Karanga is enacted on an assumption about gender, instead of deeper exploration as to why it is gender that matters in that

specific circumstance, and if the definition of woman being used comes from tikanga or colonisation. It is a fierce debate, muddled by competing understandings of history and varied access to trained kaikaranga on each marae. Takatāpui and irahuhua can bring these tensions to light, encourage the naming of what the exact issues are, and offer new pathways through.

Te Awekotuku et al. (2007, p. 10) note one whakawahine (trans-feminine Māori woman) who did ascend to the role of kaikaranga, and her “[o]riginal, biological beginnings have been simply disregarded, and forgotten”. The whakawahine kaikaranga who is able to perform femininity acceptably is allowed to karanga, but that acceptance is conditional on the success of her performance. She challenged the grounds of ‘womanhood’ on which the karanga was performed, but still conformed to an extent. On the flip side, one of Pihama et al.’s (2020) participants recounted that they felt shut off from performing the karanga as they would not wear a skirt despite being raised to take on the role. One of Dickson et al.’s (2023) participants questioned if their status as kaikaranga would be accepted if their affiliation to femininity derived from self-identification. In the PhD research, Kōkō struggled with being restricted on what they could do in a pōwhiri (meeting ritual) due to their gender identity. Tāiko, Kōkō, and Maire all felt a deep interest in extending out the ikura (the menstrual period) as a site of connection to the cycles of the environment, but felt cornered at every turn by the insistence that ikura is principally a marker of womanhood, only useful for bearing children. At each instance, irahuhua participants wanted to explore the richness of te ao Māori, but were shut off from accessing it, or discouraged from questioning the status quo because they demonstrated an understanding of gender beyond the binary. Takatāpui and irahuhua, through redefining the way that gender is discussed and embodied when they choose to be explicit about their identities, encourage a return to the values underpinning tikanga rather than the repetition of actions for the sole reason that we have always done it this way.

Mikaere (in Mikaere and Hutchings 2013) and McBreen (2012) warn that repression of tikanga in favour of strict rules can only produce intellectually lazy tikanga which relies on the words of a potentially biased few and stunts the development of te ao Māori. Of note for this article are the findings from the *Honour Project Aotearoa* (Pihama et al. 2020) that takatāpui had higher language retention and culture-seeking behaviour than participants in a broader *Te Kupenga* (Stats NZ 2014) study, and many participants directly correlated the exploration of their identity to an increased drive to learn te reo or to assist on the marae. In terms of the “importance of being engaged in Māori culture”, 92% of takatāpui respondents reported that involvement was “very important”, compared to 22.1% of *Te Kupenga* respondents in 2013, and 46.3% of *Te Kupenga* respondents in 2018 (Pihama et al. 2020, p. 83; Stats NZ 2014, 2020). Not only does the quantitative data suggest a higher level of targeted connection for takatāpui, but the narratives shared in the study do as well. One participant (as cited in Pihama et al. 2020, p. 25) felt “I didn’t know how to reconcile my queerness with my Māoritanga. . . and then I started learning about this word takatāpui and the history of it and what it meant and all of the examples and how things had actually changed post colonization”. Their identity as takatāpui encouraged historical inquiry and the interrogation of colonial values. Ravulo et al. (2024, p. 223) found that in discussions with Indigi-Queer people across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, “[h]ighlighted in each of the conversations was a tangible longing for a revival of traditional cultural mores”. Participants in Moyle’s (2023, p. 5) research with takatāpui in state ‘care’ raised the same idea: “As takatāpui we search for our tūpuna takatāpui amongst them as we strive to see ourselves reflected in the past. By connecting with the past, we aim to enlighten our people”. Kerekere (2017, p. 160) writes that the term takatāpui “invited takatāpui to reconnect with Māori culture, values and worldviews”. By purposefully seeking out cultural education and

knowledge, takatāpui and irahuhua enact Ormond and Ormond's (2018) conceptualisation of homeland. In this understanding of homeland, collective conscience, ritual, and shared narrative enrich tikanga, further cementing people's place on land and identity alongside it. Such complexity also requires the Māori surrounding takatāpui to learn into what Hoskins (in Bell et al. 2017, p. 12) refers to as "te ara whanaunga, the relational path", favouring inclusion over exclusion. This benefits the broader community as it strengthens how Māori adapt to new identity structures, encourages rigorous intellectual and cultural engagement, and reiterates the most central elements of tikanga. When takatāpui and irahuhua challenge these narrow restrictions, as in the case of Waimirirangi in Hamley et al. (2021, p. 16), she "charts new courses for herself, her whānau, takatāpui and Māori".

6. Whanaungatanga

The most central of these tikanga values which takatāpui and irahuhua encourage is whanaungatanga (Pihama et al. 2020; Hamley et al. 2021; Hamley et al. 2025; Kerekere 2017; Simmonds 2011). Whānau is generally translated to mean family, but as with much Māori language, it is significantly deeper than the one word conveys. Kupenga et al. (in New Zealand Planning Council 1990, p. 10) claim that "the whānau [is] an organism, sharing a common life". It is a living being of its own, and "everyone who is Māori will know the meaning of 'whānau' and whānau never leaves someone behind" (Marea as cited in Marino 2020, p. 6). Whānau can be roughly understood as the most basic social unit in Māori lives and is not defined by a specific structure, rather a specific relationship dynamic. Henrickson (2006, p. 261) writes that, for many takatāpui, their relationships with and between family were particularly "complex, somewhat contested but close". Often, participants in the PhD research such as Rātā and Toka spoke to feeling guilty for having a closed off relationship with their immediate family due to their LGBTQ+ identity. In response, others pointed out that claiming the immediate is the sole family is a reiteration of the nuclear family model.

Whānau historically included extended and adopted family spanning multiple generations, but under colonisation, has been aligned to the nuclear family. Again, takatāpui and irahuhua, through navigating contested but close relationships to family, offer a new perspective here. Many of Moyle's (2025, p. 65) participants outlined the "fostering and caring roles" which takatāpui would fill in order to extend the domain of parenting and ensure children could be treated as tama-ariki, little chiefs (Kerekere 2017). In the *Honour Project Aotearoa* (Pihama et al. 2020), takatāpui participants were more likely to include aunties, tūpuna, kaumātua, extended cousins, and life partners in their whānau composition than non-LGBTQ+ Māori who largely kept whānau to the nuclear definition. They were also more likely to whāngai a relative's child or co-raise a child, moving beyond nuclear colonial ideas of family composition. Kerekere (2017) and Dickson et al.'s (2023) participants recalled that oftentimes mothers did not want their children to identify as a lesbian because of the lives they expected for their daughters. But whāngai is a common practice in whānau Māori, and lesbian couples can still bear children—each of the mother's homophobia clouded her understanding of whānau, leading her to return to closed ideas of biological families and narrow notions of parentage.

Moving beyond the nuclear immediate family, which takatāpui and irahuhua often do, encourages a notion of family bound in more whakapapa, spiritual, and community involved groupings. Critically, "[w]hānau can include non-kin relationships that have become whānau-like" as "colonisation and urbanisation have shaped how Māori make meaning of their diverse identities" (Greaves et al. 2021, pp. 94–96). Winiata (in Mikaere and Hutchings 2013) recounts many instances of Māori forming communities parallel to iwi, hapū, and whānau such as gangs, religious movements, urban Māori collectives, political leagues, and military groupings. These communities embody rangatiratanga,

moving beyond colonial ideas of what Māori organisations should look like, to what they could. In dealing with complex relationships, takatāpui seek to redefine what it means to be whānau. They make space to include biological whānau who accept and embrace takatāpui, leaders who advocate for the ability of takatāpui hapū members to be included in the hapori, and takatāpui whānau in the shared whakapapa sense. This also includes those chosen whānau who provide support when takatāpui leave their whenua, create kaupapa that connect takatāpui to others, and those who move “beyond dichotomies of dis/connection within whānau and into spaces of vast potential” (Hamley et al. 2021, p. 3).

7. Fracturing Whānau

Oftentimes, takatāpui and irahuhua exclusion from whānau is considered to be principally the issue of the takatāpui whanaunga. However, there is also harm on the side of the excluder which impacts all aspects of their life. Here, we need to toe the line. The principal harm is done to the takatāpui whanaunga, that much is unquestioned. But literature also reveals that the harm flows both ways. As Korohū raised in the PhD research, the destabilising of the whānau unit, or “family pressures that make you feel divided”, are “just what the coloniser wanted”, only serving to reduce the efficacy of Māori to work as a community.

Nikora and Te Awekotuku (2016, p. 5) recount one particularly tense tangihanga (funeral rites) in which many whanaunga were “distressed” at the treatment of the takatāpui person’s close friends and chosen family, and the ceremony was “perfunctory”, souring the chance to truly mourn the loss of the whanaunga. The parents of takatāpui and irahuhua children often recall being afraid or embarrassed about how their child’s identity might reflect on their own identity and their family unit, which jeopardised relationships (Gordon-Stables; Kapua as cited in Kerekere 2017; de Bres and Morrison-Young 2024). If one whanaunga is homophobic and the others are not, there can be a division between the accepting and non-accepting whānau where “there is no relationship and there never will be” (Pihama et al. 2020, p. 59). Despite reporting high levels of support from family, Māori participants in the *HIV Stigma Index* (Te Whāriki Takapou 2021) also identified high instances of discrimination from family. This indicates that family response to those living with HIV and AIDS (not all of whom are takatāpui, it is important to note) is often fractured within whānau units. Hamley et al. (2021) report similar findings where whānau response to Waimirangi’s identity as whakawahine was often uneven. This created a divide between those who were accepting and those who were not, and disrupted Waimirangi’s relationship with her nephews, vital to intergenerational knowledge transmission. One of the participants in the *Honour Project Aotearoa* removed themselves from their father, “a man’s man and [coming out] probably would have shocked him, and disheartened him” (as cited in Pihama et al. 2020, p. 63) to live with their nan. Though the report does not discuss it, the father and nan no doubt spoke about this change in living situation, placing the pair at odds. Another participant recalled needing to pull their brother into line as he was calling all of the members of the whānau to ensure that people knew his daughter was in a relationship with a woman, while another recounted that her father addressed their relationship in front of the whānau so that the unspoken feelings everyone had would not impact their relationships before he passed away (Pihama et al. 2020).

Both de Bres and Morrison-Young (2024), and Moyle (2023) relay narratives in which parents of LGBTQ+ children removed themselves from faith-based institutions in support of their child, with one of Moyle’s (2023, p. 36) participants noting that their mother choosing to leave the Church “was a very courageous step for my mum because overnight she lost all her friends and whānau. . . and I saw that grief and loss”. de Bres and Morrison-Young (2024) and Moyle (2023) also note that parents of takatāpui children have had social services

called on them because their raising of children within the child's takatāpui identity was considered a form of abuse by their community, while [Dickson et al. \(2023\)](#) relay participant experiences of having their own Queer identity used as grounds to remove their children. The uplift of Māori children is a tragedy in any instance, and to have families willingly handing children to state services due to misinformed notions of abuse has significant ripple effects for the parent, child, and whānau. If Māori are not aware of takatāpui and irahuhua, and operating out of colonised knowledge bases, it can jeopardise relationships with Māori who are not prejudiced or have a closer relationship to the whanaunga. Takatāpui and irahuhua exclusion is not just cutting off one whanaunga, it is a deep-rooted action which reverberates out into the community.

8. Coming In

If rejection from the whānau echoes throughout the whānau, then embracing takatāpui and irahuhua is similarly impactful. Discussion of takatāpui and irahuhua experiences with family through a LGBTQ+ lens typically centres on the practice of 'coming out' which has long been considered one of the climactic moments of a Queer person's familial history ([Orne 2011](#); [Nakhid et al. 2022](#); [Barnes and Tse 2021](#); [van Bergen et al. 2021](#)). Though the notion of coming out is often implicitly understood by those with even a cursory knowledge of LGBTQ+ lives, [Orne \(2011, p. 681\)](#) has identified that "the definition of coming out remains conflicted. Packed with multiple meanings, researchers no longer specify what coming out means for their analyses". One of the biggest variations within coming out is the assumptions made about specific relationship structures and normative genders and sexualities ([Dickson et al. 2023](#)). [Nakhid et al. \(2022, p. 3\)](#) outline that much 'coming out' discourse does not apply to ethnic LGBTQ+ peoples who occupy and come out in three distinct social spheres: their ethnic community, their Queer community, and their broader society. Discourse on coming out which assumes Western community structures largely ignores the unique social assemblages of takatāpui, irahuhua, and other Indigi-Queer peoples who straddle multiple social spheres with competing familial constructions and expectations.

As a response to the inadequacies of the coming out framework, [Wilson \(2015\)](#) describes the process of being two-spirit in the Opaskwayak Cree nation as one of 'coming in' to your family as you are, as opposed to exerting an identity and expecting others to come to you. Coming in "does not centre on the declaration of independence that characterizes 'coming out'... coming in is an act of returning, fully present in our selves, to resume our place as a valued part of our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations" ([Wilson 2015, p. 3](#)). [Keovorabouth \(2025\)](#) emphasises the importance of the terms returning, resuming, and connecting when framing coming in as opposed to coming out, which is often seen as a more jarring change in relationships. For a Māori retelling of this sentiment, Ihimaera (in [Barnes and Tse 2021, p. 317](#)) writes that "[o]nce, I had simply been her nephew and she had been my aunt. My coming out had led to a particular act of trust—the giving to me of the diary". In [Laurence's \(2020, p. 59\)](#) thesis, one of their participants, Jynx, framed it as such: "you're not coming out—you've been there all along and just no one's looked". This is the embodiment of coming in, where identity deepens and restructures relationships. [Hamley et al. \(2021, p. 10\)](#) also draw on the concept of "re-mem-bering" which, in a similar vein to coming in, "provide[s] a context for Waimirirangi to revise or reorganise her relationships within her whānau". Distinguishing coming in from coming out is not merely semantic. Coming in is a fitting term for Indigenous peoples, as "the priority to maintain a close connection regardless of gender roles or norms further contrasts with the individualistic manner in which Western views were introduced" ([Ravulo in Weaver 2021, p. 113](#)). 'Coming in' centres on a very

specific collective and relational reality where M/māori means normal, while Queer by default means non-normal—hence why an individual comes out, stepping away from the norm. In the PhD research, Tītoki felt the term “Queer doesn’t sit well in Te Ao Māori, as you have a place in your family”. Maire agreed, saying that “you’re Queer to Pākehā”. This specific relationship between Queerness and non-normality is a uniquely takatāpui and irahuhua experience, connected to the reality that everything Māori is ‘māori’ in Aotearoa. In research with non-Māori ethnic New Zealanders, one participant (as cited in [Nakhid et al. 2022](#), p. 13) explains: “I thought of it as like breaking through something that was built around me at birth”. Coming in, by contrast, can be understood as entering into something built from birth: whakapapa, whānau, and mana tuku iho.

Coming in is seen by [Wilson \(2015\)](#) as the ideal relational structure for Indigi-Queer peoples, but in light of the tricky task of undoing the internalisation of colonial approaches to gender and sexuality, takatāpui often find themselves facing a complicated process of coming into te ao Māori. This process can be long and muddled, often involving a targeted separation from their whānau and place of upbringing to seek out lives in cities ([Te Whāriki Takapou 2021](#); Matthews as cited in [Boynton 2025](#); [Kutia 2019](#); [Beyer and Casey 1999](#); [Kerekere 2017](#); [MacFarlane 1984](#); [Te Awakotuku 1989](#)). For many Māori, to whom urbanisation was an unsought requirement of economic opportunity, takatāpui choosing to head to the cities is framed as the opposite of coming in, as it is a rejection of the whānau unit and the knowledge it holds. However, [Paora \(2023b\)](#), p. 13) writes from personal experience that in reality, living in ‘traditional’ rural Māori places limited their Māori identity as “I felt I could not connect entirely [with Māoritanga], because in the essence of my being I existed outside of convention”. Waimirirangi (in [Hamley et al. 2021](#)), reported similar feelings, where her move to the city was one stage of her experience with whanaunga and allowed her to come into those relationships stronger and more confident. Stepping back from te ao Māori, in order to step back in with more confidence in personal and collective identity later on, is often a necessary pathway for takatāpui and irahuhua. Part of the push to leave communities and seek out urban or specifically Queer experiences comes from the emphasis on cohesion that is common in Māori communities, where gender and sexual identity can be unspoken. Though this is consistent with pre-colonial tikanga, the world has changed radically, and unspoken acceptance may no longer be enough. Just as mana wāhine is explicitly named as important because of the damages of unseen imported misogyny ([Pihama 2021](#); [Simmonds 2011](#); [Mikaere 2011, 2021](#)), “[i]n an ideal world, I would say that acceptance is the most tika behaviour. But we live with a dominant culture that condones homophobia” (McBreen in [Mikaere and Hutchings 2013](#), p. 64). [McBreen \(2012\)](#) argues that emphasising non-recognition in favour of social cohesion often appears as silencing, and is distributed unevenly where takatāpui and irahuhua who deviate from the norm are merely tolerated instead of accepted.

Tolerance does not equate to active choices made by Māori to embrace all whanaunga, instead it is often manifest as a sort of passive unacknowledgement, where the ‘issue’ of gender and sexuality is left just under the surface, conditional on not rocking the boat. As such, many takatāpui and irahuhua may not see their own acceptance, and often assume that their marae will be like the marae they have heard about, where trans/homophobic ostracization and bullying are commonplace. Moyle (in [McBreen 2012](#)), Haunui (in [Kerekere 2017](#)) and Waimirirangi (in [Hamley et al. 2021](#)) returned to their marae later on and found acceptance they did not necessarily expect after hearing so many stories of rejection and not actively seeing embrace or care for those who had come in before them. Critically, this acceptance varied based on differing factors with. Coming in to community is not a single process for Queer Māori. In the *Honour Project Aotearoa*, oftentimes takatāpui relationships which were unspoken and accepted were based in sexuality and required little change from

family to accept the takatāpui individual (Pihama et al. 2020). For irahuhua, this may not be as common, as being trans-often (not always) requires some degree of transitioning. There are physical and social changes which require recognition that are either led by the irahuhua whanaunga realigning their body, or by the whole hapū and whānau accepting the role that may not be what was intended (e.g., supporting whakawāhine through karanga), or when a name has changed. Explicit recognition and celebration of takatāpui and irahuhua whanaunga primes marae and whānau to re/receive their own members back into the fold with confidence, which strengthen the marae and whānau as a whole as “more gays will come and if marae don’t adapt, we’ll find other homes” (Rearea).

9. Conclusions

This article builds off of research conducted for a PhD thesis and gaps in the literature on takatāpui and irahuhua identity and relationships. As such, it represents a limited and small-scale study. Participation was limited to those identifying as gender-diverse and Māori, and while support people were present at most interactions, the focus was on individuals as opposed to their communities or families. Bringing in extended whānau of participants fell out of the scope of the thesis, but their inclusion in future research can help illustrate how irahuhua fit into Māori communities. This would also provide resources to help whānau support their takatāpui/irahuhua whanaunga by detailing marae that have already made steps to be more inclusive, or the impacts of being exclusive on whānau. There are also opportunities to connect to more irahuhua in broader contexts, as the thesis recruitment occurred primarily online or through closed networks. The first and third wānanga were held as part of events targeted at takatāpui, while the second was recruited through online snowballing and posting in closed and localised Facebook groups, due to the risk of advertising research publicly. As such, participants were predominantly young, urban-based, and already moving within LGBTQ+ spaces. As Dickson et al. (2023) make clear, LGBTQ+ research often excludes elders, and as is evident in some anecdotal evidence, urban and rural takatāpui do not experience the same relationship dynamics (Kerekere 2017; Paora 2023b; Ngātai-Tautuku 2025). Targeted research into how takatāpui and irahuhua kaumātua experience belonging and contribute to hāpori would be invaluable, and research with takatāpui should aim to leave the main urban centres in order to connect with Māori in rural areas.

Māori gender relations and identities have long and muddled histories, often written in sand by non-Māori pens. We are in a time of great change and development, where the old and new worlds are colliding and Māori must chart a way through. The guiding stars of this navigation are whanaungatanga and tikanga, and these cannot be actualised without real care and consideration for *all* Māori. Through challenging how Māori relate to history and envision the pre-colonial, demonstrating the importance of a tikanga grounded in adaptability and values of care, and emphasising the centrality of whānau, opening the way for takatāpui and irahuhua Māori to ‘come in’ to whānau strengthens, not distracts, te ao Māori. In essence, restoring “[a] complete sense of self-identity has benefits not only for the individual, but also for the whānau, hapū, and iwi” (Aspin in Worth et al. 2002, p. 98). The embrace of takatāpui and irahuhua does not just mean bringing one or two individual people into the fold of marae, an isolated series of exceptions to the gendered rule. Embracing takatāpui and irahuhua represents a move to unpick colonisation in every aspect of te ao Māori, as the colonisation of gender and sexuality appeared in every aspect of the colonial project.

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Notes

- ¹ Aotearoa is not used in this article as a synonym or dual name for New Zealand, but instead as a label for the unique assemblage of places protected by Māori, which ‘New Zealand’ has been imposed on. It is used when Māori experiences are central, and non-Māori ones are peripheral.
- ² Pre and post colonisation are used in this article to define the state of the whenua before and after contact with Europeans, not to indicate that colonisation was one event which has passed.

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